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SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF THE FAILURE IN ENGLISH

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First, let me state my very firm conviction that there are no failures in English as English. There may be a few students who are inherently unable to grasp the principles of mathematics or science or manual arts, but there is no pupil who cannot, if his case be properly diagnosed and the work adapted to his needs, make real progress in English. English is the cosmopolite of college and high-school curricula. There is enough of the logical in the construction and analysis to satisfy the student of the strongest mathematical bent, enough of the obscure and hidden to interest the delver into science, enough of romance and beauty to entrance the most imaginative and poetic; and yet of the 187 failures in our high school for the last semester 49 were failures in English. The percentage of failure for all subjects was 7.1, while the percentage of failure in English was 8.2. And what is true of Huntington is true of high schools everywhere. Why this high percentage of failures, you ask, if every pupil can make a creditable showing in English?

A grouping or classification of pupils who fail may help us to answer this question. Failure in English is due to one of three causes: (1) lack of interest and application on the part of the student, (2) inability to discover his own difficulties, or (3) lack of mental ability to keep pace with the class. A questionnaire, submitted to seventy Seniors in my own classes, disclosed the fact that twenty-two had failed somewhere in their English course in high school. Of this number, fifteen belong to the first group of *blasé* students who have keen intellect but who fail because of inattention to work, five belong to that smaller group of students who are conscientious but do not recognize their own difficulties and so can do nothing to overcome them, and two come in the only

class that really should be called backward pupils—those of sub-normal mentality. Of that first group of fifteen, six ranked in class A in a psychological test given early in the year. Of the five people in my classes making an average of 95, three were from this group that had failed in English in a previous course.

Obviously then, our first problem is sizing up the pupil and placing him properly. Properly grouped, the remedy is simple. The number of *blasé* failures in English is out of all proportion to that in any other subject, because there is not the zest of untried fields, as in science or mathematics, nor the utilitarian appeal of the manual arts. The subject-content is often juvenile to the pupil's stimulated and sophisticated taste. It has been my observation that more students of this group fail in English because it is too easy than because it is too difficult. In dealing with this type of failure we must rid ourselves of all notions that classes in English I must read *Snowbound* and *Ivanhoe* and classes in English II must read *Lady of the Lake* and *Silas Marner ad infinitum et "ad nauseatum,"* and that Johnny cannot enter the sacred portals of English V before English IV has been duly dissected and the percentages accurately recorded in the office files. Often a transfer from English III to English V or from English IV to English VI, where the subject-matter is more adapted to his experience and development and where the class is more nearly of his ability and tastes, will transform a flunker and a truant into an interested student. You have aroused his pride in his own ability; you have given him something to work for; he must make good to justify your faith; he is under obligation to you and he will strive manfully to meet that obligation.

Oh yes, I have tried my own prescription. There is a certain captain in the United States Army somewhere down on the border who came into my class of English I, having "flunked" it twice before. And after four weeks of infrequent attendance and absolute disregard for class assignments he was sure, I saw, to "flunk" it again. He was sixteen, keen, and bright as could be, but bored to death at being classed with "babies" and at having to read "Horatius at the Bridge" and other thrilling "kindergarten stuff." With my principal's permission, I transferred him to English IV

with the privilege of making credit for English I, II, and III by outside work and tests. Needless to say he more than justified my faith.

That was the most spectacular success I have ever had in transferring pupils who were failing to a class of high rank, although I have tried this solution of adjustment a dozen times and it has always worked; but then I prescribed it only in cases where I knew it would work.

A not-so-common but much more difficult problem is that of the conscientious student who fails and does not know why he fails, and fails again because he has failed. This group of pupils requires all the patience and skill of the most conscientious teacher. The teacher who would be of real service here must concede that the solution of each pupil's problem, whether it be one of punctuation, spelling, mastery of the fundamental usages of English grammar, interpreting the thought of the sentence, or properly analyzing the motives of the hero, is of vitally more importance than that he shall have learned facts of biography or completed an assigned number of pages of rhetoric. Work with this group of students must be individual. The problem and project method must take the place of the formal recitation.

Last year my principal called me into the office to help solve the problem of a girl who was then a Junior and who had an excellent record in mathematics and science but who had failed in English four times and in history twice. The only reason that she could assign for her failure was her inability to spell correctly and to read rapidly. A series of tests disclosed the fact that she had no idea of phonics. She was just as likely to begin "hear" with an *m* or a *t* as an *h*, and frequently she wrote words of two syllables without a single vowel. Sounds and letters had no association for her—not because she was sound deaf, but because she had never been taught phonics. Naturally, she could not pronounce any better than she could spell. Three weeks of incessant drill in the front pages of McGuffey's speller showed her the method of attack and she has been hard at work ever since. Last semester she carried five subjects in high school, four hours a week in night school, and tutored in English, passing the semester's work with a

general average of 80 per cent. She will graduate this year with her class, and you could not pick out her test paper in any subject because of poor spelling.

By a series of tests on fundamentals of English, as spelling, punctuation, use of verbs and pronouns, vocabulary, and a general comprehension test, I tried out the problem and project method with a class of Seniors last year. After giving the tests I graphed on the board the standing of each pupil in each test. A grade of 75 per cent was required for passing. A heavy red line separated the failures from those passing. From a series of carefully prepared exercises each pupil worked out his own problem: when he had successfully passed the red line on the graph he attacked another problem. It frequently happened that there were four or five different groups in my classroom at one period, each group working upon a different problem. But every boy knew why he wasn't "good in English" and just how to go about correcting his mistakes. To insure speed as well as accuracy, two weeks was the maximum time allowed any student in which to pass the red line in any test.

I discovered, quite by accident, a very interesting by-product of this semester's work. On the day of the final test, a half dozen boys dropped into my room to watch me grade papers. They were so interested in the standing of certain pupils that I began to ask questions, and then they told me the story. They had organized among themselves a Better-English Club and had elected certain fellows professors. They were anxious to know the standing of their "profs." Two of the "profs," by-the-way, barely passed with a grade of 75, and there were some changes in the faculty. So interested were the pupils themselves that I have been called to the telephone after nine o'clock in the evening to settle some disputed point in English usage. And the teacher of mathematics tells me that the Better-English Club carried its activities even into the trigonometry class.

Once in my checkered career as a teacher of English have I had a chance to experiment with a really subnormal group of students. There were a dozen of them culled from the various classes, all boys who had habitually "flunked" in English. My principal gave permission to make my own course of study. That was in 1915

when champions of Germany were quite as numerous and more vociferous than those of England; and so the war served as a point of departure. The *Literary Digest* published a dictionary of war terms that furnished many a needed lesson in spelling, pronunciation, and word study. The *Digest* itself was material for debate and oral composition. War ballads from Scott to Kipling were read and enjoyed. We mimeographed our ballads in the office, the boys taking turns running off the copies. We read *The Crisis*, the *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, and other war novels. We even studied Shakespeare's *Henry V*. No, "studied" is hardly the correct verb to use. They didn't know a thing about Bardolf or Mrs. Quickly and they could not have selected the climax and falling action if their grade had depended upon it, but they could declaim with vigor:

"Now lords, for France," . . . "No King of England if not king of France," and "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more," "Be copy now to men of grosser blood and teach men how to war."

There was much oral composition, much to study of newspaper and magazine, but very little English as English was taught; and yet I list that semester's work as one of the most successful of my teaching.

Having failed some hundred or more pupils in my own classes, I may be pardoned the conclusion that the English teacher who habitually fails even a small percentage of her class either is lazy or lacks the professional interest and equipment to solve her difficulties. The solution of our problem lies not in failure—that is shirking our responsibility—but in a flexible course of study adapted to the needs of the class, a keen appreciation on our own part of the difficulties of the individual pupils, and a separate class for the really subnormal. Only when we as English teachers have faced our problem squarely and solved it, will English cease to be a drudgery and a bore and become, as it should be, the joy of every high-school boy's day.